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SOME NOTES OF A STRUGGLING GENIUS. *By G. S. S.*

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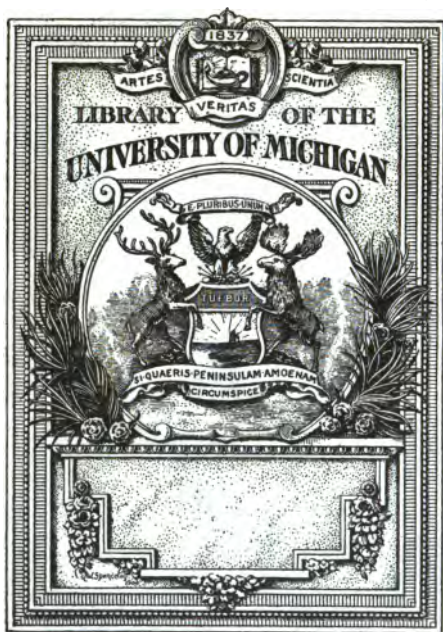
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**SOME NOTES  
OF A STRUGGLING GENIUS**



*By the Same Author*

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A BOY  
QUALES EGO. A Book of Essays  
THE WISE AND THE WAYWARD.  
EPISODES

Some Notes 75588  
Of a Struggling Genius

BY  
G. S. STREET



JOHN LANE, *The Bodley Head*

London and New York

1898

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## Preface

**W**ITH your permission I wish to write something about the publication of these notes, "to prevent criticism," as Brisk says in the play. Most of them were printed some four years ago in the "Pall Mall Gazette." There was little of them altogether, partly because I was not inclined to write more, partly because a more industrious person than I was kind enough to adopt the little manner of them, such as it was, and to prosecute it with better success : I thought I might as well stop.

But these things being so, I conceive that you may be annoyed by the reprinting of what follows. I am nervous about it. For when, some time ago, I took the liberty of publishing a little book of essays, I was told that I had committed an impertinence. My critic seemed to think that I had swindled anybody who had paid three and sixpence for the book, which the critic, by the way, had for nothing. Now the publication of this fresh impertinence is due to its publisher. I tried to dissuade

## Preface

him, pointing out that we might both be sent to prison for our pains. He persisted, however, for some reason I am quite unable to fathom (this is not, please, said complacently), and he has a stronger will than I. So I gave way, and devoted my arguments to beating down the price, with a view to mitigation of sentence. (This ought not to bore you: we are all interested in prices now.) I beat it down to a shilling, and there it stuck. A shilling, net. There has been a great dispute in the more important and obvious division of contemporary literature about the merits of this net, as compared with a discount system. My own objection to the net system is that people write and abuse me because they have gained nothing by going to the stores to buy my books. However, it is not my affair. I am heartily sorry my book has cost you a shilling, or has not, as the case may be; I had far rather you had it for ninepence, but I am powerless to help you.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I do not translate these figures into terms of American coinage as a compliment to American readers: firstly, because I do not know if the great discount war is waged in America; secondly, because American readers are richer than English readers; and, thirdly, because American readers do not read my books.

## Preface

So much for the more important matter. As for the notes themselves, they were suggested by the conversation of a struggling genius, my friend. I say this frankly, because I would rather be thought unoriginal than autobiographical. The exposition of my own habits and sensations would not be amusing, and I have no intention of making it. The reviewer who thought that the title of the book referred to above — it was “*Quales Ego*” — meant “What am I?” was mistaken: I invited no such personal inspection. As it is, I have been accused of having held myself up to ridicule in another book, a little farcical attempt at the satire of a mode now something vanished. I did no such thing. Both that book and this are little farcical presentments of modes of life and points of view and phases of character which have met and amused me: the first person singular is an easy way of writing: neither that book nor this is personal to myself. I confess that I have read these notes — after some years — with a melancholy interest. They were, or seem to have been, written in good spirits. There is a cheerful vulgarity about them which I am glad to have achieved; I have even a faint hope that they may be called “breezy.”

## Preface

I have been perforce so egotistical in this preface that a line or so more about myself will make little difference, although I am aware that the intrusion would become a better or a more important man. I have tried, in my way, to do better work than such trifles as these or "The Autobiography of a Boy," — work which has interested me seriously, and the result of which, whether failure or not, is more to me than success in a hundred farces. But our nonsense is dear to us all, I think : it means so much of mood and temper while it lasts, and it is apt to leave us so suddenly. I would then plead an excuse for being willing to see these trifles collected in a book over my name. All the same, I shall be grieved if you are annoyed, having paid a shilling. If you have not, there's an end of the matter.

G. S. S.

*March, 1898.*

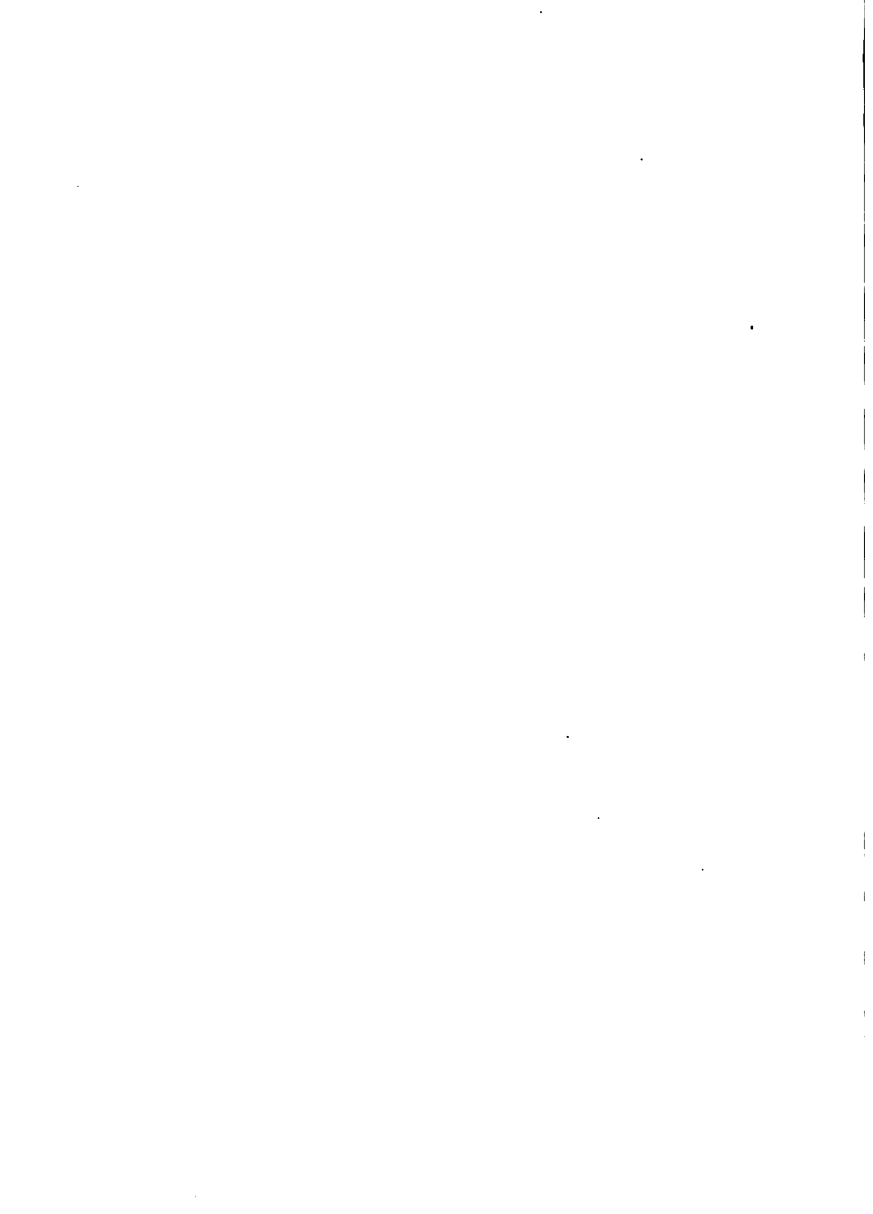
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**HE PAWNS HIS  
WATCH**



# Some Notes of A Struggling Genius



## HE PAWNS HIS WATCH

**T**HE sky was blue, the grass was green, and the birds sang, when I set forth to pawn my watch. There was a promise of spring in the air, and all nature mocked me. People went by in cabs as if nothing in particular were the matter, and the crossing-sweeper at the bottom of the street saluted me without a suspicion of irony. I very nearly stopped and told him.

I had long seen that it must come. The tragedy of my life has been that I could never manage to be in debt on a large scale. People who owe hundreds of thousands do not pawn their watches;

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

they are never in want of "a tenner ready." I have a friend whose means of livelihood is an elaborate system of loans on life insurance policies ; at intervals, of course, a new loan on a new policy has to be contrived that the interest and premiums on the old may be paid, and this is a pleasant diversion in the monotony of my friend's life. The system is like an inverted pyramid, requiring continually a fresh apex. Some day, perhaps, that will not be forthcoming, and the whole edifice will topple over, and my friend will have to build anew. Meantime he is clothed in a fur coat, and fares sumptuously every day. But the few miserable hundreds which I owe bring me in no income at all. So it had to come. My borrowing powers were exhausted, and I had begun to hear the brutal suggestion that I should give up being a struggling genius and do some work. It had come to this, that I had no money to buy a dinner. As to Algernon in "Rhoda Fleming," so to me, dinner had always seemed a matter of course: you are

## He Pawns his Watch

born, and you dine. Being a struggling genius teaches you many things. Sorrowfully I set forth to pawn my watch.

It was my own watch, and I could do what I liked with it. I had to repeat this to myself continually, for I was oppressed, vaguely but intolerably, by a feeling that I was doing some wicked, some criminal thing. I had not pawned my watch since I was an innocent, happy child at school. Then, so far as I remember, I had no scruples at all: but then it was for pleasure, now it was for subsistence; now for bread, then for cakes and ale. Every respectable person I passed in Pall Mall was a reproach to me; I looked askance at policemen. But, after all, it was our cruel social system, which refuses a "living wage" to genius, that was to blame; I sneered savagely at the Athenæum. It seemed hours before I reached the Strand and looked sympathetically at Trafalgar-square, associated in my mind with riots of the unemployed. "It is not generally known that the three balls at the

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

pawnbrokers' shops," etc., the anecdote in Charles Lamb about his friend, who always fell back upon this announcement when material for writing ran short, came suddenly into my head. O to be back among my books, remote from this horrible reality ! I looked into the window, as if making up my mind to buy something, and entered with the air of an inexperienced thief. The man inside was affable and pleasant, — so pleasant that I half thought of trying to borrow from him, "as between gentlemen," but reflected that our acquaintance was short.

It was done, and I had joined the ranks of the watchless. There is not a mile between the Strand and my rooms, and at least fifteen children asked me the time on the way. I became restless ; the money was accursed, and I loathed it. It is not difficult to get rid of a few pounds in an evening in London, if you like entertaining your friends.

"What's the time?" "I'm not sure, sir; I'll look at your watch." I was wide awake in a moment, and explained volubly that it had gone to

## He Pawns his Watch

be cleaned. It would never do for him to know. I am not much of a hero to him as it is. He took a considerable time arranging my brushes, while I fidgeted in bed. But I felt secure for the moment. After breakfast I considered what else I could take to the affable man behind the counter. It must be something that would not be missed. I myself have moments in which I almost doubt the balance of advantage in being a struggling genius. You are master of your time, and can have a secret contempt for the slavery your friends are enduring at the bar or elsewhere; but your friends who do nothing are in better case than you. The possibilities of achievement may be exciting, but the humours of impecuniosity are monotonous. I cannot, therefore, reasonably expect Thompson to sympathise with me; in fact, I would rather he did not know I am a genius. I will preserve such shreds of heroism as remain to me. "What is it, Thompson?" "You left this on the dressing-table, sir." It was the pawn-ticket.





# **HIS SUPERIOR MIND**



## HIS SUPERIOR MIND

**I**N matters of opinion which remain matters of opinion only, you need not trouble to make up your mind. Indeed, to do so is in most cases merely a confession of imperfect knowledge or imperfect sympathies, a sign that you perceive only one side of the question. The more thoughtful attitude is Adrian Harley's shrug of the shoulders, "to show that he had no doubt there was a balance in the case — plenty to be said on both sides, which was the same to him as a definite solution."

But where, unhappily, opinion must be translated into action, this sort of solution will not do. Unless you are prepared to stand on a landing for ever, you must decide whether you want to go up-

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

stairs or down. And that is one of the reasons why I find life so fatiguing ; I never can decide. Duty is, of course, imperative ; prove to me that it is my duty to do this or that, and I will do it unflinchingly — to a certain extent. But I fear you will find it difficult to prove any such thing ; I have read a great deal of philosophy, and should require you to take your stand on some principle other than any *ipse dixit*. If I had lived in the days of Nero, I do not, to be quite frank, think I should have admitted it my duty to be burned for a Christian martyr ; I should have been open to conviction, but hard to be convinced. But these are large matters ; you will admit there are many questions in the daily round in which only one's personal gratification need be consulted. In any average alternative of these my mind is balanced with a perfect equilibrium, so perfect, in fact, that I cannot even begin to act. It has been pointed out that, if you hesitate whether to say Richard or William, to say either Wilchard or Rilchiam im-

## His Superior Mind

plies a preference. I never get so far. For example, if I am not dining with anybody, I go to one of two places to dine by myself. I walk to the top of the street and then have to decide to which of them I will go, for one is to the east, the other to the west. I never by any chance decide until I have reached the top of the street, and then I stand still, balancing. If you think of it, there is really an infinite number of considerations involved in such a decision, — distance, cost, cooking, comparative quietude or noise, — and some of them are on one side, some on the other side. I stand balancing at the top of the street until very often there are six cabs waiting for me to take one, or a small crowd collects to look at me, or a policeman eyes me suspiciously. To be asked suddenly at breakfast whether I will have tea or coffee sends the blood rushing to my head. I admit I have paused a full minute in doubt whether first to help myself to marmalade or to take another piece of toast. Thus it is that a beautifully balanced mind,

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

a proof in theory of a high order of intelligence, becomes to me in practice a positive curse.

“ That low man seeks a little thing to do,  
Sees it and does it —— ”

I look down on him from an immense height, but confess I envy him at breakfast. We have to suffer for our superior intellects, do we not ?

They tell me I am not a good person with whom to discuss a plan of action. That is partly due to my balance of mind, but also to a certain discursiveness. I had agreed to go out of town with another man for Easter, and he came to debate with me the comparative advantages of the country and Paris. In the first half-hour of the discussion we settled that the eighteenth-century attitude towards life was agreeable, that four-wheeled cabs ought to be better than they are, and that Plato was a Buddhist ; we differed about the merits of Sir Henry Irving's acting and the proper pronunciation of “ Zounds.” In the next

## His Superior Mind

hour we decided that we should like knee-breeches and three-cornered hats to be worn again, that a certain popular writer was a bore, that there would be a new age of faith, and that brandy before lunch was disastrous. We decided nothing about Paris and the country ; my friend left in a bad temper ; he wired to me to meet him at Victoria, and I, after an agony of indecision, missed the train. A discursive mind is a mind that sees resemblances, a poetic as distinguished from a scientific mind. It is a proud thing to have, but I sometimes wish I were a quite commonplace person. My mind is really a very fine thing ; it is beautifully open, richly stored with comparisons and similes, able to balance alternatives with the most perfect nicety — and I can never make it up.





## **HIS INFERIOR STOMACH**



## HIS INFERIOR STOMACH

**N**OW I mention it, it occurs to me there is a pretty close analogy between my stomach and my mind. But though I called the latter a superior mind, and rightly, I am justified in calling my stomach inferior. It all depends upon the point of view. Just as my mind — an excellent mind for metaphysic and all kinds of subtle analysis — is rather a failure in face of the petty decisions of daily life, so my stomach, a splendid organ in the larger sense of the word “stomach,” is unequal to acts of digestion which quite commonplace stomachs can achieve. Therefore, I am fain to call it inferior, because its vocation is clearly to digest.

I hope you will not think me lacking in delicacy for displaying this machinery to the world. I take an impersonal interest in the matter, and, in fact, a long series of divergences between my stomach and me has led me to regard it as a thing outside my-

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

self, a separate entity, so to speak, with its own ego, and all that sort of thing. Our relations are intimate, indeed, but neither friendly nor confidential. I confess I use plain terms to it, and its protests are unexpected and inconvenient, and so I hold myself free to criticise it with little ceremony. I have never sought its confidences; I have no scruple in using them as evidence against it.

As I said, it is a splendid stomach in the larger sense of the word. In this sense it is, of course, primarily a symbol of half our hopes and struggles here below. One of two great factors in life, the desire of self-preservation, has its dwelling-place here; the habit of acquisition and, indirectly, the desire to kill, receive hence their stimulus. Modern social customs keep these activities in subjection as regards their direct manifestation, but I have them, potentially, in a perfectly healthy state. If I see a desirable thing, I would take that thing; if a man opposed me, I would kill that man — but for public opinion. In a small

## His Inferior Stomach

way I do what I can. I never return what I borrow until compelled, and keep to this day and gaze at with delight a shilling time-table I stole deliberately from a hotel. Also I once pushed a small boy on one side and took the last seat in a railway carriage before him. The indirect exercise of these activities — business transactions and so forth — are less in my way ; the mind has to operate, and mine is no good, as I have remarked, for common things. Consequently I fall between two stools, but that is not the fault of my stomach.

In another sense of the word the stomach is the symbol of a temperament and a philosophy. There are people in whom it is said to have replaced the heart. Theoretical materialism is, of course, exploded, in the old interpretation at least ; but I am perfectly consistent in my practical materialism. I keep no faded handkerchiefs in secret drawers, nor any violets under my pillow. I never bother about what might have been, never start and turn pale when I meet anybody

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

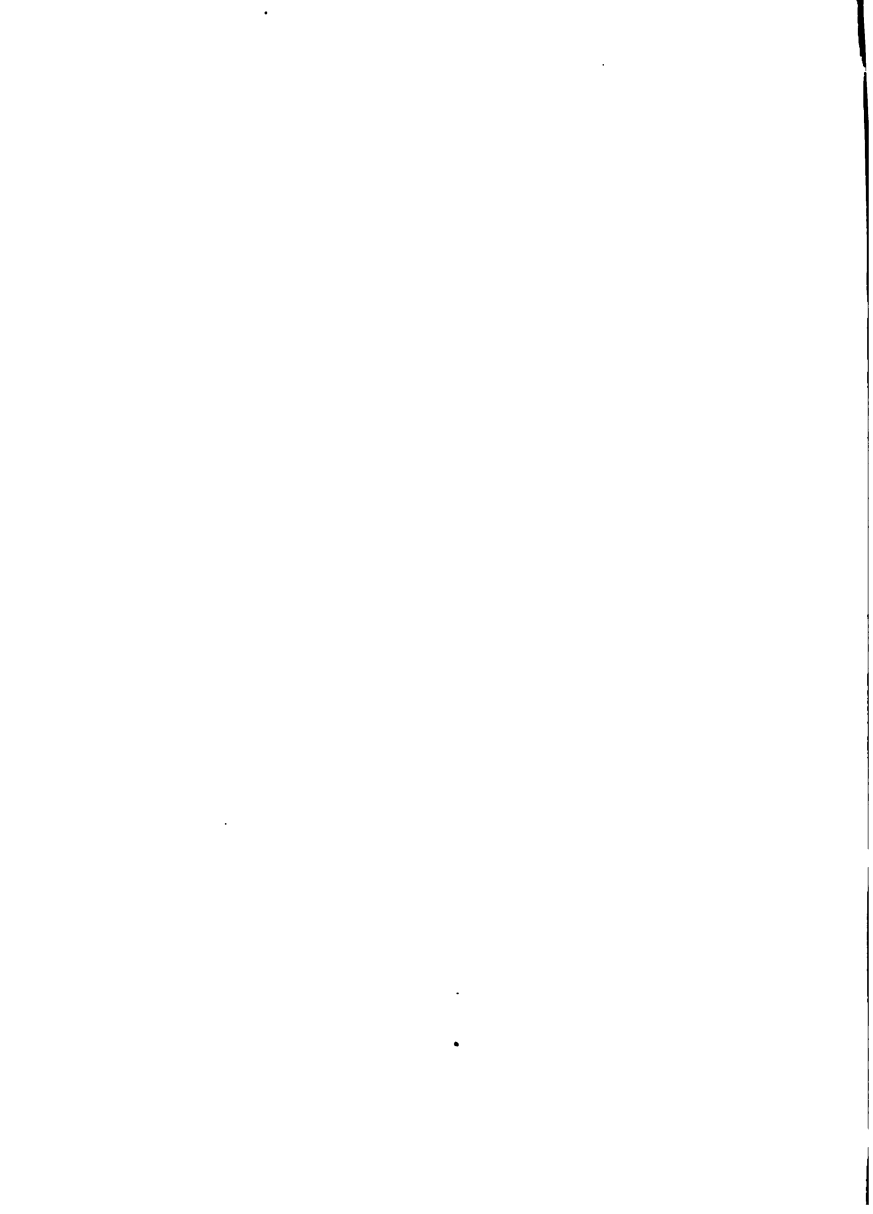
after long years. I cannot be sufficiently grateful to my stomach for freeing me from all these follies. It is an admirable philosopher, perfect in its serene contemplation.

But when it comes to digestion, it is a fool. If it could, it would limit me to a diet of air. It is absolutely capricious, and there is no known food or drink against which it has not protested at one time or another. It is the uncertainty that tries me most cruelly: I never know what I may eat or drink; immunity in the past is no guarantee for the future. I could tell you of the most pathetic inconsistencies, of the most extraordinary experiences, but fear to be thought vulgar. Some people are so odd in this respect; it would merely argue a want of refinement in yourself, but I would not annoy the least refined of my readers. From the refined all things are refined, nevertheless.

Am I not unfortunate? A stomach that is a perfect philosopher in theory and in practice cannot digest. Oh, the irony of nature!

## **HIS ANNOYING REPUTATION**





## HIS ANNOYING REPUTATION

I AM willing to bear with resignation the ordinary lot of mortal man. Amateur theatricals, healthy walks, bilious suppers, and uneducated regenerators, — I take them as they come in the day's work. But when I find myself saddled with a reputation I have done nothing whatever to deserve, — a reputation which stands like a wall between me and the love of my fellow-men, and condemns me to everlasting bitterness and boredom, — I claim a right to protest against the universe. I am a clown *malgré moi*.

Whence the reputation comes I do not know. I look at myself in the glass, and see the reflection of a sober Englishman, bald and statesmanlike, with no infinite humour nor merry eye about me, — a simple, straightforward Saxon. It may be that to

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

others my face seems that of a natural low comedian; I do not know. But I should have thought that even low comedians were allowed their moments of seriousness, allowed to share the sorrow and invite the sympathy of their friends: no such thing is allowed to me. Everybody I know is convinced that whatever I say, on whatever occasion, I intend to be funny. You remember the man in Catullus who smiled on every occasion, at pathetic speeches and funerals, and is reminded that nothing is more inept than inept laughter? That is the sort of man I am supposed to be. Sometimes, even now, a friend will confide his sorrow to me; but he does so with a beseeching look, as who should say: "*Do* recognise that this is a serious matter, and *don't* attempt one of your silly jokes." Then I say something appropriate and sympathetic, and immediately my friend smiles a sickly smile, and says probably that it is no laughing matter to *him*. All serious talk is hushed when I go into a room, and people sit with grins of pain-

## His Annoying Reputation

ful expectation, many of them obviously bored by having to leave an interesting subject for inane laughter. If a genuinely funny man is there, they think me a tedious anticlimax. Moreover, I am not allowed to have any sorrows of my own; they are supposed to be invented for other people's amusement. A woman I know nearly had a fit when I told her how I had fallen off an omnibus. I think if my wife were to elope, this friend would laugh herself into apoplexy. I told a man the other day that my aunt Rebecca was dead — told him quite simply; he roared with laughter, and then rebuked me for making a jest of such things.

I am not only supposed to be destitute of all sympathy with human sorrow, but this reputation of clowning has earned me the reputation also of envy, malice, and all uncharitableness. Thus, if some pitiful lapse of virtue is mentioned to me, and I find excuse for the sinner, I am supposed to be sarcastic and a mean-minded fellow. I have an enemy whom, nevertheless, I honestly admire; if

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

I praise him, I am thought sarcastic again, and again mean-minded.

I am supposed to be not only a clown, but a stupid clown. But I put it to you: if every trivial and commonplace remark you made were criticised from the point of view of its being meant as a joke, could not you, too, be thought stupid? The wittiest man alive would not stand such an ordeal. A remark about the weather, or about the political situation, an opinion on the newest religion, or the latest play,—anything I say is regarded as an attempted joke, and received with maddening indulgence.

And yet I solemnly protest to you I have never seriously made a joke in my life. I remember in early youth upsetting a cup of tea in my hat, and another time bumping my head against a hanging lamp. These are the only funny things that I have ever consciously done, and it is surely hard if they are responsible for a reputation which has made me the most miserable man in London.

**ON THE FOLLY OF  
BEING POOR**



## ON THE FOLLY OF BEING POOR

**I**T has occurred to me of late that we who despise money and deem no sum of it a fair recompense for disagreeable toil are in error. To put the matter shortly, I have come to think poverty a foolish thing. One was brought up in the contrary way of thinking, to be sure ; the delights and wisdom of poverty and the evils attendant on riches were pictured to our youthful imaginations until almost we wondered why any man took pains to be rich. This teaching was, indeed, counteracted to some extent by experience. Seeing that riches were as dirt, we may have thought it a small thing to ask our richer kinsmen to divest themselves of some small portion in our behalf ; we found that their view was different. But they went on with their teaching : they were charmed by the figures



## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

of indigent merit and wealthy wickedness rampant in Charles Dickens. And at school, Diogenes his tub, and Socrates his simple fare, were held up to our admiration, the difference between the Greek and English climates being forgotten; and Horace, having celebrated (that he might eat Mæcenas' oysters) the greatness of Augustus in inferior verse, sang, with perfect art, of the charms of cabbages. For myself, when I read Catullus' invitation to his friend to dine and to bring the dinner with him, for that the poet's purse was full of cobwebs, I was enchanted to a rapturous delight in the prospect, the very secure prospect, of poverty.

Certainly those of us who went on from school to a university found that money was rather useful. My own recollection of Oxford is that it held money in some regard; a youth with a few hundred pounds a year more than his fellows was called a "rich man," and was not, I think, shunned on that account. But in those days credit, that engine of national prosperity and in-

## On the Folly of Being Poor

dividual collapse, temporarily removed those inequalities, and the real meaning of the matter was not brought home to us. So one went into the world with the belief that to do disagreeable work for money was not worth while, that money was altogether a secondary matter. It is to dissipate this belief, which I hold to be the cause of much discomfort, that these remarks are written. I would beseech my readers to be rich; I *know* that they will thank me in the end. Not that I wish them to be millionaires and monsters. By advising them to be rich I mean to recommend to them an income of ten thousand pounds a year or so — twenty thousand at the most.

To resume. I am aware that much may be said against my advice. I shall be told, I know, that your rich man is not allowed to be extravagant, lest he be thought vulgar: his wine must not be rare, nor his wife's jewels expensive. He is not allowed to be generous to his poor friends, lest he be thought to buy their friendship, whereas

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

your poor man need make no bones about unique port or lending money. But consider the other side. The rich man (a commercial argument for a commercial age) buys everything, especially money, more cheaply than the poor man; his money goes much further; he pays cash, not credit prices; he does not waste his money on paying interest, and insurance premiums, and lawyers' costs. Again, he has not to keep up appearances; he may dress shabbily and travel in third-class carriages. These are but a few of the advantages I have observed. Not, indeed, that I speak from experience of both states. But I have added to a personal acquaintance with poverty some observation of the rich, and I affirm without hesitation that their comfort is worth the unamiable and occasionally disgusting methods by which they procure it. It is possible I may be met with the familiar idea that riches may be sought in vain. But I am appealing to persons of superior intelligence. Anybody of average intelligence and elementary

## On the Folly of Being Poor

common-sense can make money. Have you not met scores of men who have made money and whose general stupidity is beyond conception? Have you studied faces in the City? And anybody of superior intelligence and elementary common-sense can make a fortune. How many people of undoubted ability of mind and of proved commonplace wisdom are there who have taken pains to learn a trade, plied it patiently (stockbroking, company-promoting, provision-merchanting — any trade by which large fortunes can be made), and failed? You have no instance, I am very sure. I am very sure that a person of superior intelligence, — proved in science and letters, — will he but learn the trade of butchering patiently, may beat all the butchers in England, become a mammoth butcher, and found a county family. Yet there are scores of men of superior intelligence, men of science, painters, writers, who might be rich and are not. Some of them realise the advantages of wealth and make an effort; and

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

what do they do? They commit pot-boilers, hand-books of science, popular novels, and the like. I do not despise them for wishing to be rich; I despise them for their misplaced and inadequate endeavours. A popular author, I am told, may make some three or four thousand pounds a year. Go to Mr. Beit, thou fool, and ask him what he thinks of four thousand a year! To say nothing of the rent and riddled artistic conscience. I exhort these more or less impecunious delightful and intelligent persons to make money in the way in which millions are made. Let them go to the Stock Exchange, start stores, promote companies. In a few years names now familiar in the publishers' lists alone will head subscriptions to public funds, and there will be an artistic coterie in Park-lane. The drawbacks are not serious. To rise at nine, to turn out into broughams on rainy mornings, to talk to uninteresting people about cricket and the theatres, to affect prejudices from which they are free, to eat and drink more than they may require,—

## On the Folly of Being Poor

these are small things. As for the intellectual operations required, they will become a habit, even a pleasurable habit. A successful man of business once told me he quite enjoyed making money, the fun and stimulus of the thing. And then, in a few years, free from sordid cares, with duns aloof and nerves placated, they will return to their artistic achievements. And I have kept the greatest inducement to the end. You can do so much good if you are rich.



# ON THE JOYS OF BORROWING





## ON THE JOYS OF BORROWING

**I** DO not mean asking a famous financier down to your place to shoot, and concluding a dignified and magnificent mortgage ere he drives away. Nor do I refer to borrowing half a crown from the butler. These extreme incidents of an advanced civilisation are not my theme, but rather that middle course appertaining to modest men, who are not without a shilling for a cab, but "simply must" raise a few hundreds before Thursday week.

There is, as Charles Lamb has told us, a "great race" of borrowers, great and grand men who "call all the world up to be taxed," irresistible, genial fellows, who "anticipate no excuse and find none." Alas! either we are fallen on a mean age, or the present writer is not of this race, for he finds the excuses of destined borrowees inexhaustible. Mean, sordid, commercial excuses they are,

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

lamentably wanting in nobility and frankness. As a rule, indeed, the excuses insult you by their utter inadequacy. One man has promised his grandmother never to lend; another has promised your great-aunt never to lend to *you*. That, by the way, is an instance of the depth of malignancy possible to some people: they not only will not lend themselves, but go out of their way to prevent other people acting in a more generous spirit, as a sort of cowardly cloak and support to their own meanness. I suppose they are infected by the popular paradoxes of the period when they say they wish "to save you from yourself," but the remark has always seemed to me as heartless as it is foolish. When excuses fail your friends, you meet with blank refusals. Few people, of course, are such savages as to say "No" with a serious air; and if it is still a question of Thursday week and not of next Thursday, you may enjoy their attempted joviality. "Want five hundred? My dear fellow, so do I. I wish you 'd tell me how to

## On the Joys of Borrowing

get it." You turn from this clown to another, who says: "A monkey? I hope you'll get it: I could n't raise a pony if I tried." And then the brute goes home to his large (and unencumbered) house and indulges a huge appetite. A third pretends to believe you are in fun, and tells you a professedly amusing story about a man who went to Holloway. You laugh to keep him in a good humour; but "it ain't never no good," to use the phrase of a philosopher.

Your friends failing, you think of professional relievers of the distressed. Alas! again. The habitual insolvent knows that this also is vanity. Arrived at years of discretion, he reflects, not so much on exorbitant interest — which, if he must have the money by next Thursday, he does not mind — as on the little matter of security. Perchance, however, he remembers his guileless youth, what time he went the round of all the money-lenders in town; remembers the awful moments in the ante-rooms of the great ones, the old masters

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

and ancient armour, and then the very polite but searching questions, and the bland but impregnable refusal. Or he remembers, perchance, calling on one of the little ones, who received him in his shirt-sleeves. "'Undred, capting? 'Ave two 'undred. 'Ave five 'undred.'" "Thank you, I'll have five hundred." "We shall 'ave to send a man to look at yer 'ouse." But the roof which sheltered the youthful financier from the wind and rain sheltered also his people, and so the proposal collapsed. Remembering these things, the habitual insolvent reflects that years, which have brought wisdom, have not brought security or a house of his own. Bills of sale are vulgar things, and you may not be aware that insurance offices require two householders as sureties before they will lend you money. They do indeed.

Yes, the way of the borrower, the modest borrower, is hard. But there are compensations. Though he may not be of "the great race," he has yet his moments of exaltation. After the first

## On the Joys of Borrowing

depression, the absolute necessity of raising that five hundred gives one a pleasant glow, a feeling of breadth and openness, a generous good-fellowship, a devil-may-care jollity. You are freed from the very pettiest of economies. When you recognise the necessity of raising many pounds at a coup, it is plain folly to take care of the pence. What are beer and 'buses to you? You take a hansom by the day and see that your brand of champagne is of a good year. You dare not let yourself think, and so you go round the town. The feeling is very like (I should imagine) that of coming suddenly into a fortune. But one who comes suddenly into a fortune cannot indulge his feeling of expansiveness, for fear of being thought vulgar, whereas the loan-hunter is a spendthrift chartered by all nice people.

A pleasant time, and it cannot last long enough for its joys to pall. That is so satisfactory to remember. Thursday week is on its way, and then — and then —



**ON DISTINGUISHED  
PEOPLE**





## ON DISTINGUISHED PEOPLE

**D**ON'T you hate them? They are so irrelevant.

Of course, until the dead level of mediocrity, which we are told is coming, is reached, there must be distinguished people, not merely of the distinction produced by purple faces and outré attire, but people of real distinction, who have discovered America or been interviewed in the papers. I have no objection to their existence; on the contrary, when they get into the Divorce Court or do anything amusing, their distinction gives an additional attraction to the affair. I like, too, to read about their back-yards, and that sort of thing; it passes the time, and puts no strain on the reasoning faculties or imagination. I read a book once called "Celebrated Friends of Mine," or something of the kind. I had never heard of

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

most of them, and a quite appalling amount of virtue was recorded about them all; but I enjoyed reading about their meat-teas and babies and other things which would not have been mentioned if the author had not thought they were really distinguished people. I love trivialities, in fact, and if it were not for distinguished people should miss a great deal: one would be restricted to reading of Labour problems and somebody's religion. Long live distinguished people, they and their lunches, liaisons, lamp-shades, and latch-keys!

But I detest meeting them. I don't care who they are, great warriors, travellers, scientists, women with missions, or young men with indecently apparent futures—I don't wish to meet them. When they are expected, and fail to come, I am relieved, and so I believe is every other insignificant person present, except, perhaps, your hostess and the creatures who like to boast of having met So-and-so. And my reason is that the irrelevant character of their distinction is seldom in reality admitted.

## On Distinguished People

Sometimes, of course, they are vulgar, blatant people who monopolise the conversation, or rather annihilate it, who insist on trotting themselves out. Sometimes also of course your host or hostess is a lion-hunter, who will not leave the good people alone, and insists on their boring you to death against their will. In fairness I put those cases on one side. We will suppose that distinguished person and entertainer alike are well-conducted and amiable people, and that no unprovoked reference is made to the distinction. Still, in some subtle manner you feel its presence, feel that the great man's opinion of the last new play is thought of more importance than yours, whereas in all probability he has devoted less time than you to such matters and his opinion is comparatively valueless. The core of the question is that in social life only social qualities should be considered; all else is irrelevant. Sometimes, indeed, the distinction is a guarantee of sociability. Your great warrior will probably be pleasant company, because there

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

is a tradition of modesty in the army. But if you are set to talk with a dull dog, what recompense is it to know that he has discovered a new black-beetle? Why should a man of disagreeable manners be tolerated socially because he has written an even more disagreeable book? Distinction of almost any kind should, in fact, be counted against and not for a man socially, because its existence begets a vague feeling of anticipation inimical to agreeable intercourse. A man's distinction should be considered socially as something he has to live down. When he has done so I will tolerate him, but in a general way I don't want to meet him. These remarks are not inspired by injured vanity.

One word more. Why should we be asked to read an ill-written essay on a subject of which the writer is obviously ignorant, because he is distinguished in some other connection? If an essay on boot-blackening is required, surely it should be written either by somebody who understands boot-blackening, or by somebody who can charm by his

## On Distinguished People

writing, so that the subject is immaterial. As a matter of fact, it will probably be written by Dr. This, who knows all about Hindoo temples, and nothing about boot-blackening, and writes anyhow ; or, failing him, by Lady That, because her name is familiar to readers of "society" papers. But since the attack is on distinguished people and not on the British public, it is enough to remark that they are irrelevant again. Here, too, they should live their distinction down, and get up their subjects or try to write. It is difficult to determine how a good autocrat should deal with them. Perhaps they should be offered a choice between a strict incognito when remote from their special fields of activity (and interviewers) and a comparatively painless death. But when they tell me the insignificant person is about to have his day, and therefore that no more "Celebrated Friends of Mine" can be written, I think it is a pity.



# ON WRITING AN ARTICLE





## ON WRITING AN ARTICLE

**W**HEN you glance at an average article — I pay you the compliment of supposing you do no more than glance — you are in the habit of saying, “Any fool could have written this.” That, at least, was my own invariable reflection, with (I confess) the further one that I, who am no fool, could have written it far better. I used to compute that I could write about six ordinary articles before lunch, and it seemed an easy and comfortable way of earning a livelihood. It seemed an agreeable life. I would breakfast in a civilised way at ten, write my six articles in a pleasant, casual, slippered way, and stroll into Piccadilly at two, with the rest of my day for pleasure. Thus I should earn (a few figures proved it) about fifty pounds a week, being four times a colonel’s half-pay, or

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

nearly as much as a music-hall singer's income. There was, indeed, the objection that the life was too easy, possibly, for the dignity of man; that it gave too little employment to the energies and intellect of a noble specimen of the race; that Carlyle would have been rude about it. But (I reflected) obvious work is not the only employment of faculties; at afternoon tea, on a race-course, in a theatre, one's faculties may be in full use, one's intellect alert and worthily employed; life and human nature are worthy the study of a thinking man. As for Carlyle, I happened to be a Utilitarian, and he had called Utilitarianism a "pig philosophy;" I cared little for what Carlyle would have thought.

So I gave up my chance of a career elsewhere, and came to London to write articles. Having established myself in a manner suitable to a man who was going to make fifty pounds a week, and add six bricks to his house of reputation every day, I dropped in on an editor and told him what I

## On Writing an Article

intended to do. I was careful to avoid any appearance of intellectual arrogance, and concealed my contempt for the models he suggested to me. I even remarked, with a pleasant smile, that he might not care for my articles, and liked the humility with which he replied that they might be above his comprehension. We exchanged these courtesies for a while, and then, "By the way," he said, "on what subjects can you write?" I answered, "Oh, anything," and he simply said, "I see." With this *carte blanche* I left him. It was natural I should be a little elated, seeing success in clear view, and it was wise to work off a little excess of spirits in the amusements of the town. But a week later I sat down seriously to my task.

It was rather difficult to choose a subject. When you come to think of it, there is really a huge number of things in the world. Being of a literary habit, books suggested themselves to me. I thought of a critique of Mr. Swinburne, or a study of Byron. But this was criticism, and I wished to create, think-

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

ing — in those days — that the creative was the finer faculty. Besides, such subjects are not quite apposite, perhaps, ~~not~~ of the sort for which mere newspapers care. Moreover, the editor had suggested a humorous article. I thought of a comic article on Registration (about which people were then talking) in the style of the "Pilgrim's Progress," but made little way with the idea. A translation of Tacitus' account of the ancient Germans, with modern examples, was a bright conception, but I could not work it, as I had never been in Germany. A description of a play in the style of Pepys was vetoed by the editor, who said it was stale.

It was very difficult to choose a subject. Books failing me, I went into the world of men in search of humour. Before I had purposely looked for them I was always encountering humorous incidents; now I saw few, and those not convenient to my purpose. A man going under a ladder received a dab of paint on his hat, but my "Perils of the

## On Writing an Article

Pavement" ran to half a page only. I followed a drunken man all down the Strand, but he only hiccoughed. I went all over London on an omnibus to catch the driver's humorous remarks, but you can make little of "igher up." I underpaid a cabman in the hope of a humorous repartee, but he simply called a policeman.

It was impossible to choose a subject. My friends' suggestions were useless. One suggested Tommy X., who always stayed till one when asked to dinner; an article on Tommy would, I was told, be a service to society. But I owe Tommy half a sovereign, and it seemed unfair to hold him up to public hatred. Another suggested the cooking at his club; a third the repairing of the clock on the tower of St. James's Palace. The funny man of "my circle" made an obvious pun, and thought I could expand it into a humorous article.

Oh, yes, any fool can write the article, but you must give him the subject. The difficulty nearly drove me mad. I would sit biting my pen at my

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

writing-table after breakfast and pace up and down the room for hours. Instead of finishing six articles by lunch-time, I had merely eaten six pens. I took long walks to clear my head. I plunged into dissipation by reason of my despair. I could not sleep. My projected article got on my nerves so completely that I was unfit for social intercourse. I developed the worst faults of the copy-hunting journalist, and all without writing a line that could be printed. When a subject came I could not deal with it; my mind went a-gadding to another before I had arranged the most elementary scheme. The most delightful subject that ever delighted Sterne would have seemed to me simply not worth while. The responsibility was more than I could bear.

At last, having tried the whole world of noble ideas and humorous incidents, I went crestfallen to my editor, who told me to write an article on an old woman who had swallowed her teeth. Not, you will suppose, an extremely diverting or inspiring subject, but the responsibility of selection

## On Writing an Article

removed, one could find words. I do not know if anybody laughed over my article, but at least it was brought to an end and printed, and I could regard the universe with some equanimity again. Therefore, when you hear of fine scholars, erudite and experienced, bringing their powers to bear upon some ignoble and dictated subject, do not pity them. If they must write articles, they are a thousand times more fortunate than the writer who may choose his theme from all the world.





**ON HARD  
WORK**



## ON HARD WORK

**I** CONFESS I loathe work of any kind or quality whatsoever. My idea of a happy life is to lock myself in a room at the end of a long passage, the passage also with a locked door, in a house surrounded by a large park, the park also surrounded by a high wall, and to sit there, not talking, or reading, or admiring the scenery, — simply to sit. But I am quite ready to admit that I must work. I must work, steal, or starve, and I am not clever enough to steal and not the sort of person to starve, and, besides, am very conscientious. I am willing to work, and have plenty of work to do ; my difficulty is to find the time.

Take an average day. You get up, and you have breakfast. I suppose you a conscientious person, whose breakfast is not contained in a

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

glass, but who fights down a robust egg and some bacon; all that takes time. Then you have to read the morning paper; to neglect it is to have nothing to talk about to your elderly relations, and savours of academic arrogance. Then if you are neither rich enough to keep a man who will shave you, nor extravagant enough to have a man in to do it, you have to go out to be shaved, and that means putting on your boots. It is no use to deny it; you can't start a beard without going into the country for a month, and your work keeps you in town. If you begin one in town, people will say you want to be thought a genius. Very good. You go out to be shaved, and that brings you up to lunch-time. The late Sir Andrew Clark said that brain-workers need a meat-lunch, and a meat-lunch requires sedentary digestion. That brings you to about half-past three, when, to keep in good health, you must take an hour's constitutional. At half-past four you must go and have tea somewhere, unless you are void of human

## On Hard Work

sympathies, and ungrateful to those who have dined you. It is time when you return to your home to dress for dinner; or perhaps you have half an hour to write letters in. You dine; and you digest. Suppose you dine out: you can't rush away the moment you have finished eating—it looks so materialistic. Suppose you dine at home; are you never to play a game of billiards, never to go to a play? You might as well live in a desert. It follows that you can't get to work before half-past twelve, which is an absurd and suicidal time at which to begin a *magnum opus*. You go to bed.

That is an average day, and see how barren it is. I have said nothing about going to church, or love-making, or dancing, or playing cards, let alone work. To work, it is clear, you must live an unnatural and hermit-like life. I have tried it, and will tell you the result. I rose early, hurried over all my meals, and took no constitutional. I went to nobody, no, not I, and nobody came to

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

me. The result was that I put in just two hours of good solid work. What with the clock ticking, and the fire going out, and leaving my pencil in the other room, and getting a frantic headache by three in the afternoon, two hours were the whole result.

I do not wish to say anything paradoxical, but it really seems to me that the longer time you give to work, the shorter time you work. The more you shut yourself up, and shut out your friends, and generally make a slave of yourself, the less work you get done. It is like trying to economise money. I have tried that too; I tried it for a whole day. I shaved myself, and the chemist charged me half a crown for oil and plaster, and things to patch myself with. I cadged on some people for lunch, and the boy of the house reminded me that I owed him a sovereign. I went back on the top of an omnibus, and my hat blew off and was run over by a cab. I stayed at home all the afternoon to save boot leather, and

## On Hard Work

four men came to see me, drank a bottle of whisky and three siphons of soda-water and smoked half a box of cigars. I walked home from the house where I dined, two miles in the rain, and spoiled another hat and a new pair of pumps. There were other disasters which I forget, but my total expenses on that day of economy came to nearly £10. My average income is about half a crown a week, and I therefore determined I could not afford economy. It is so with work. There is, moreover, another objection to working hard, beside the one that it means getting no work done. The objection may not apply to breaking stones, but it does to my particular work at least, which is writing novels. The sort of novel I intend to write is a very actual and up-to-date sort of novel, a satire on modern manners. How am I to satirise modern manners if I do not go about and observe them? Of course I must go to dinners, and balls, and music-halls, and other places where you meet actual people. I suppose the other fellows who



## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

write clever novels do these things; I suppose they do not sit at home always and evolve their descriptions of modern manners from their inner consciousness of what is fit, and from the conversation of the housemaids; but how do they find the time?

I wish they would tell me, for my conclusion, that the only way to work is to be absolutely idle, is very sad. I want so much to be honest and to earn my living.

## ON HEALTHY EXERCISE



## ON HEALTHY EXERCISE

**P**ERSONALLY I regard it as an anachronism, and would rather do without it. Our bodies will ultimately conform to changed conditions of civilisation, and then nobody will need it. I am inclined to think my own body is all right, thank you, even now, and that if I kept the matches where I could not reach them without standing up, and walked round the room while I fastened my collar, it would be exercise enough. My doctor suggests that after a few years of this regimen it would be enough exercise for anybody else to walk round *me*. It sounds as if it might be an old joke. I give it for what it is worth ; in any case, scientific truth was sacrificed to it. However, I comply with the times, which insist we should all be fine athletic Englishmen.

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

I am therefore (please understand) a fine athletic Englishman. But every man has a right to be fine and athletic in his own way, and I draw the line at certain pastimes. Football, for instance, is a horrid game. To look on is all very well ; to see one's fellow-creatures coated with mud and bumping against one another gives one a pleasant sense of superiority ; but if you don't mind, I'd rather not play it. Cricket compels you to hurry over lunch and makes you too hot to have a glass of port with your cheese,—one of those ancient customs against the disuse of which I in my humble way like to protest.

However, the matter is a relative one : it is exercise in London. Everybody knows the difficulties. Many people surmount them by taking the train to somewhere else ; but that is, I think, more than can be reasonably demanded of me. I did not invent London ; if my fellow-countrymen chose to make it, they have no right to object that I choose to live in it. I will not leave town except com-

## On Healthy Exercise

fortably to take my ease. I refuse, therefore, to join a rowing club or to play golf on Wimbledon Common, or go for any purpose whatever to Wormwood Scrubbs. The matter is reduced to exercise possible in town. What is there? There is the ride before breakfast, which people who know I breakfast in bed assure me they take. For that matter, there is the ride after breakfast. But unless some philanthropic plutocrat removes a certain difficulty, it means for me neither breakfast nor dinner: that is, if I were to ride a horse; of course there is bicycling, but bicycling — well, I don't bicycle. I have tried boxing. If by boxing you mean putting on flannels, strolling round a gymnasium, and then having a bath, I agree it is an agreeable amusement. But to be shown that my head is too far forward by a blow on the nose, or too far back by a blow on the stomach, does not amuse me at all. Fencing is a muddling sort of thing; it seems to mix up intellect with exercise, and I like to keep them distinct. There are

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

places where you can play lawn tennis, but they are chiefly a sort of communistic gardens in South Kensington, where people you don't know look on and seem to think they can play better. Besides, lawn tennis is impossible in winter, "*habebis frigora febrem.*" When I was a young fellow I used to play croquet; there is little opportunity for that now. It always seems absurd to me to take so violent an exercise as dancing in a stiff white shirt; and it is to be taken only at unwholesome hours. In London, where one's friends live leagues apart, and are as difficult to reach, save in expensive cabs, as if they lived in Wales, there are certainly opportunities for walking. But walking in London clothes is impossible on a wet day, and on a fine day one is too much exhilarated to do anything so stupid. A Turkish bath is excellent in theory: to sit or lie down while somebody else does the exercise is quite my idea; but he pommels and hurts.

My claims to being considered an athlete? Some time ago somebody put forward the theory that

## On Healthy Exercise

yawning is a wholesome and invigorating exercise. I go into intellectual society and the gallery at the House of Commons and yawn. It is a high price, but I pay it to comply with the times. I laugh when I can, but melodramas at the Adelphi run for so long, and I don't laugh after the third visit. I can do nothing more robust than smile at pathetic stories, and it takes so many smiles to tire me out. Still, I do what I can, take these and a few other forms of exercise, and play my part in the national ideal. But I sometimes wish I belonged to another nation. I am proud to be an athlete, but it bores me.





# **HIS PURPOSE IN LIFE**



## HIS PURPOSE IN LIFE

**M**Y friend said I ought to have one. She said it was sad to see me drifting "from day to day" — I notice that people pronounce such meaningless superfluities of speech with especial significance — without an object, without a purpose in life. I said my purpose in life was to live, thinking to summarise the late Professor Green's philosophy, but she waved the remark aside as a vapid pun. When I asked her to define a purpose in life, she said it was a goal. A goal! The word has a beautiful, restful sound, and suggests to a poet's fancy a village public-house at the end of a healthy walk. But I take leave to assert that a goal is a stupid sort of thing to keep for your life's familiar. It is not expedient to have your eye ever on a probable event, to which all your actions

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

are meant to conduce, to consider each day as bringing you nearer to a goal. For the joys of life are in unexpected moments: anticipate in imagination the commonest pleasure, and when it comes it is vain; much more, then, is the unwisdom of keeping one supreme pleasure in constant view. Besides, if you slave all you know for years to reach your goal, and die a hundred yards off it, what a fool you will feel!

I pointed this out to my friend, who said something about Browning, but gave up her goal and suggested a career. If there is a word I hate it is that word "career." It recalls the dreadful, complacent people who are succeeding and let you know it, people whom I live to avoid. It is like a long high-road, with mile-posts, and prim hedges, and flat fields on either side. The most amiable people are they who go zigzag, and after them the people who stay still. When you can prophesy with certainty of a man that in so many years he will be a retired colonel or a consul or a Q. C., he ceases

## His Purpose in Life

to interest imagination. Now, nobody can say of me if in ten years I shall be in the workhouse, or a waiter, or a sandwich man. A career is a base, mechanic, calculating course ; I will none of it.

My friend proposed I should write a *magnum opus*, and would not accept my excuse that I was no Fellow of a college that I should do this thing. I had several objections. The first of them was that you cannot finish a *magnum opus* before lunch. I detest a mass of manuscript lying all over the place, getting mixed up with one's invitations and summonses and things. I like to be orderly, to finish my work, and send it off to the editor before I put on my collar. My private opinion is, of course, that the shortest of my productions is a *magnum opus* ; but in England literature is reckoned by its quantity, like tea, and a *magnum opus* implies a great hulking book. It seemed to me that to plan deliberately to write a book of more than a hundred pages was to take oneself absurdly seriously, and my sense of humour stood in the way. I did,

## Some Notes of a Struggling Genius

however, entertain the proposal for a while, and thought of a collection of bad puns, or a catalogue of celebrities forgotten in the last five years, or something of the sort. If I could but have decided on a title, I might have satisfied my friend — but I could not.

I am still without a purpose in life, unless the purpose to get a purpose be one. I look out for it wherever I go, and have thought at various times of many, such as a League of Drunkards, the Abolition of Funny Articles, and the Degradation of the Drama, — purposes of which I may some day give you an account. But as yet not one has stirred all that is noble and so forth in me. If you can give me one, I should be obliged; meantime I take the liberty of living in a sort of way without it.

Here ends Some Notes of a Struggling Genius  
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